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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern, and further actions and initiatives; priority theme: "The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges"

Statement submitted by World Youth Alliance, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement

Intrinsic dignity of the human person and the Millennium Development Goals

The recognition that all human beings have intrinsic dignity is the only foundation for human rights. It is the intrinsic worth of the human person that provides the basis on which to found policies and laws that create conditions under which human beings can flourish. Without such a foundation, human rights are articulated and enforced based upon the subjective preferences of those in power, thus undermining the entire human rights project and leading to violations of human rights.

The World Youth Alliance recognizes the necessity of empowering rural women in order to achieve the Millennium Development Goals. We believe that recognizing the interdependent relationship between the development goals leads to their achievement. Every violation of human rights is an obstacle to the full achievement of the Millennium Development Goals by 2015. In particular, rural women's lack of access to health care, shelter, education, participation and protection still hampers progress towards the Millennium Development Goals.

As mothers, providers of food and caretakers of children, the elderly and the sick, rural women are at the centre of social and economic life in their communities. The empowerment of rural women brings about reduced family poverty, increased health and reduced child mortality. The opposite is true when the State does not invest in their health and education.

The World Youth Alliance will analyse and propose improvements for the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action in the light of the dignity of the human person. Specifically, we will address the importance of improving access to maternal and reproductive health and education in empowering rural women.

Maternal and reproductive health at the heart of empowerment

Maternal and reproductive health occupy a special place in our efforts to achieve the empowerment of rural women because the health of women — in particular, mothers who have formed families — is critical to achieving development at the most local levels. The family is the fundamental unit of society, responsible for the protection of new life and the formation of the next generation in solidarity. Rural women exist at the heart of family life; their death during childbirth threatens the entire development project of their family, village and society. The health of children depends on the health of the mother. Healthy children are the drivers of development and prosperity.

Rural areas in most regions of the world are furthest from achieving the Millennium Development Goals, according to the *Millennium Development Goals Report 2010*. Currently, Goal 5, on maternal health, is the least achieved Millennium Development Goal. The provision of basic maternal health care ensures the lives of rural women and mothers and must be the focus in attaining the goals outlined in Goal 5. Statistics show that maternal morbidity is highest in the rural areas of developing countries. Only one third of rural women receive the recommended prenatal care and only two thirds receive prenatal care at least once. Furthermore, there are disparities between urban and rural women: urban women are twice as likely to receive professional care at childbirth as rural women are. In particular,

sub-Saharan Africa, Southern Asia and Oceania have the lowest rates of births attended by skilled personnel and the highest rates of maternal mortality.

Therefore, for the development of rural communities, rural women must have access to maternal health care, including prenatal and post-natal health care and emergency obstetric care. The most important step in improving rural women's reproductive health is increasing the number of skilled birth attendants, who are trained in treating obstetric fistula, haemorrhaging, high blood pressure and infection, the primary causes of maternal mortality. The United Nations Population Fund states that three fourths of all maternal deaths could be averted by the presence of skilled birth attendants. Furthermore, better infrastructure, more hospitals and cleaner health-care facilities will reduce maternal mortality.

Adolescent birth rates in rural areas are almost double those of urban areas. Early and forced marriages and early sexual debut contribute to these rates. Early pregnancy and childbearing are often impediments to improvements in the educational, economic and social status of women in all parts of the world, particularly in rural areas. Early pregnancy and early motherhood can entail complications during pregnancy and childbirth. In developed and developing countries, the trend towards early sexual experience undermines efforts to fight HIV and other sexually transmitted infections.

The World Youth Alliance stresses that, given such problems, educating rural women about their reproductive health is essential. Reproductive health education that is life-affirming, person-centred and evidence-based equips rural women with the tools to know their bodies and to plan for childbearing without reliance on drugs or other medical interventions. This better enables rural women and rural couples to realize their right to determine the number and spacing of their children.

The issue of reproductive health must not be addressed solely within the framework of the provision of family planning services. The desire of rural women to found a family must be considered by States in their development of women's health policies. Statistics reflecting low contraceptive use in rural areas do not necessarily reflect a lack of access to contraception; many rural women do not want to use contraception for religious, cultural or health reasons. Comprehensive reproductive health programming is critical in empowering rural women to act on their desires to found a family.

Rural communities face unique challenges. Community members best understand what is necessary for the rural community to thrive. As such, the rural community must be the locus of decision-making and problem-solving. The political community at the national and international levels must respect the ability of the rural community to understand and confront the issues it faces. At the heart of the rural community is the family, the most fundamental unit of society, and healthy families lead to a healthy rural community. Therefore, the political community at all levels must protect and nurture the family in order to ensure the well-being of all rural people.

The world's greatest resource is the human person. Investment in the human person at the local level ensures the protection of this resource. For rural communities, investment in women in particular is critical because of women's roles as mother, provider and caretaker. Rural women drive solutions within their own local communities because they both understand the problems of their communities

and know the appropriate ways to confront and solve them. Investment in rural women requires investing in maternal and reproductive health care and education, because healthy and educated women contribute economically and raise healthy families. They transform their communities and ensure human flourishing for all those around them.

In conclusion, the international community faces the reality that Millennium Development Goal 5 is the farthest from being achieved and that maternal mortality in rural areas remains very high. Progress in the area of maternal health can be achieved only if maternal health policies consider the desire of the rural woman to found a family, and States parties must recognize the irreplaceable social contribution that rural women make in bearing and raising children and in forming them as citizens to participate in the development of each particular society. States that do not recognize this critical contribution — and do not provide the necessary basis for providing maternal health care — cannot develop, since they ignore the fundamental basis of social progress. Without healthy mothers, children and families in rural communities, social development cannot occur. Only a system that respects the intrinsic dignity of the human person will recognize and respect the needs of rural women and invest in the future of society.